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Home response journals : parents as informed contributors in the assessment of their child's reading development

Abstract

When parents are welcomed as partners in their child's "educational team," a bridge connecting the child's home and school environments is created - empowering parents as active participants in their child's reading development.

**Home response journals: Parents as informed contributors in the
assessment of their child's reading development**

A Journal Article Paper

Submitted to the

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in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Julie Wilson Morningstar

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Home response journals: Parents as informed contributors in the assessment of their child's reading development

On their day off from school, Matt and his brother Alex were playing school. Matt was trying to teach Alex beginning sounds. Alex wasn't really grasping the concept. Matt was able to explain the sounds, what to listen for, as well as provide many examples for the particular sounds. He showed a great understanding while he was "teaching".

- Mrs. Hansen

This home response journal entry was written by Matt's mom-his first language teacher. It provides an example for how Matt interacts with print outside his kindergarten classroom and how his mother interprets this interaction. As Matt's kindergarten teacher, such journal entries helped me better understand the school and home language experiences that supported Matt as a developing reader.

When parents are welcomed as partners in their child's "educational team," a bridge connecting the child's home and school environments is created - empowering parents as active participants in their child's reading development. By inviting the parents of my kindergarten students to journal with me about the children's interactions with language, I discovered how parents could serve as informed contributors in the assessment of their child's reading development.

Collaboration is essential to parent-teacher communication programs

The child's home environment is the site of their earliest language learning and has long been recognized as a significant factor in their language development (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). Teachers are well aware that when meaningful opportunities to contribute to their child's education arise, parents have the potential for making a difference (Come & Fredericks, 1995). However, most parents of today's primary students learned to

read when a subskills approach prevailed. These parents learned to read by sounding out words and many still equate learning to read with phonetic decoding of words (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Routman, 1991). Teachers eager to communicate their holistic reading philosophy with parents of their students respond with newsletters brimming with teaching ideas to apply at home (McMackin, 1993). Although DeBaryshe, Buell and Binder (1996) found that parents may alter their own home literacy strategies in response to receiving information about classroom instruction techniques, such ideas do not necessarily match a child's individual needs, potentially leaving the child more frustrated and parents more confused. Therefore a parent-teacher partnership needs to evolve from merely an information exchange to a more dyadic collaboration that focuses on the child's individual needs. Parents need to feel "empowered" by becoming active participants in the development and assessment of their child's reading (Rasinski, 1989). Such a parent-teacher collaboration may be fostered via home response journals (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Shockley, 1994; Hanson, 1994).

Beyond adjusted instruction

Hanson (1994) offered parents of her first grade students a personal view of school literacy activities by encouraging her students to journal with their families. The journals provided parents with examples of children's writing development and literacy experiences at school. Parental response to student journals provided the framework for mini-lessons and future journal entries. Another successful model of home response journals is ongoing written correspondence between the parent and teacher.

After introducing the journaling concept and sample writing topics to parents at an orientation meeting, Lazar and Weisberg (1996) initiated a journal writing exchange between the parents of school-age children and their child's teacher. Parents' journal entries often included information about their child's responses to print at home and successful strategies they had used with their

child. Such entries provided teachers with insight into the child's at-home reading and the parents' interpretation of their child's reading development. As teachers responded to individual literacy development issues a shared accountability between parent and teacher was created (Shockley 1994).

These examples of parent-child and parent-teacher journaling reinforce the potential that journals offer in better understanding each child's individual literacy development (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). However, to this point, the primary focus of home response journals has been to inform teachers and help them adjust literacy instruction to meet individual needs. Journaling could further empower parents if their responses were factors in the assessment of their child's literacy development. Orrin and Donna Cochrane's reading development continuum can serve as an extension of home response journal activities by incorporating parent observations into their child's literacy assessment.

The reading development continuum

The reading development continuum was created by a group of Winnipeg educators as they closely observed how children from birth through the teen years were engaged with print and oral language at home and school as their reading abilities developed (Cochrane & Cochrane, 1992). The developmental stages outlined in the continuum can illustrate the process of reading development for both parents and teachers. It creates a common vocabulary for talking about a child's reading development, helps teachers prescribe strategies that are appropriate to a student's current stage of reading development and is based on observable behaviors. Because observations are gathered from both home and school environments, assessing a child's current stage of reading development can be a collaborative effort between parent and teacher - further empowering parents in their child's reading development (Cochrane & Cochrane, 1992).

Traditional Beginnings

I explored the possibility of collaborating with parents in the assessment

of their child's reading development, by inviting parents of my kindergarten students to journal with me about their child's literacy activities. Throughout the school year, while interacting with my students through literacy centers and journaling, I communicated with their parents about reading development, reading strategies I employed with the children and my own reading philosophy. I wondered how a year-long exchange on literacy development would influence parent-teacher collaboration on assessing a child's reading development.

After reviewing recent literature and my own previous practice on home school communication efforts I felt ready to begin nurturing a more collaborative relationship with the parents of my kindergarten students. Like Lazar and Welsberg (1996) and Routman (1991), I realized the need to account for parents' views on literacy instruction while communicating my own philosophy and literacy strategies. I also wanted, ultimately, to extend the dyadic (student-parent and teacher-parent) exchanges to a triadic approach that would incorporate parent, teacher and student observations. Such observations would enhance my knowledge of the student and build on effective teaching strategies. Although I progressed to a more even idea exchange with the parents, my "journey" began more traditionally - by sharing my reading philosophies via literature activities explained in the weekly newsletter. The following excerpt was from the first week's correspondence:

The children enjoyed learning the poem "Barnacle Bill" and song "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes". Poems and songs we learn are printed on posters or large charts that I point to as we sing each word. This helps the children "connect" words they say with words to read. The children are excited by the fact that they already know how to read! Maybe not with words the way you and I read, but they are able to "make sense" of a book by reading the pictures! They demonstrated their "reading" ability by retelling The Three Bears using the pictures. As you read a familiar book with your child, occasionally let them read (the pictures) to you! As they grow, reading pictures will develop into reading words. It is a wonderful discovery to watch!

Relating the children's current literacy behaviors to their subsequent stage of reading development helped parents build a perspective of their child as an evolving reader and provided an introduction to the developmental reading stages and a foundation for my next home-school communication effort.

"Magical" Meetings

It was at the early September Parent Information Meeting that parents provided me with their first observations of their child engaged with print. As an introduction activity parents took turns sharing ways their children interacted with storybooks and other forms of print. In response to my prompt: "Tell me about your child's involvement with storybooks and other forms of print." the following responses were among those given:

Steph wants me to read to her
every night at bedtime.

Troy read Pizza Hut on a menu.

Karl can read Brown Bear Brown Bear
What Do You See? without my help.

Terri likes to say the letters in her
name as she writes it.

While reading to Tatum the other day,
she asked me, 'How do you know how
to read?'

These replies provided a natural segue to the introduction of Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum. I began by explaining that every person progresses through the same "stages" as they develop into independent readers. I displayed a copy of the continuum and began to relate some of the parent responses to the behaviors listed. For example, a child's curiosity about how readers know what the print 'says', is characteristic of a child in Cochrane's Magical Stage of reading development. The ability to reconstruct stories based on picture clues is generally associated with Cochrane's Self-Concepting stage. I hoped applying parent responses to the Reading Development Continuum would help reinforce the progression of stages, highlight observable behaviors and encourage parents to watch for their child engaged in similar behaviors. As the meeting ended

parents left with a copy of the continuum and a preview of its next appearance: parent-teacher conferences.

Previously parent-teacher conferences focused on me informing parents about their child's progress with the number/letter recognition and social skills found on the report card. Parent observation and input was reserved for any remaining time at the end of my comments. This year was different. Parents were greeted with the now familiar "Tell me about your child" statement and a copy of Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum. As parents shared what the nonschool literacy life of their child was like I shared similar or alternative observations made at school. For example, Mrs. Gundersen commented on her daughter's love of language: "Catie loves to make up 'once upon a time' stories about our family. They always sound like fairy tales we have read together." I used these parent observations to transition our discussion to the reading development continuum. Catie's use of familiar language patterns was charted in Cochrane's Self-Concepting stage of reading development. After further discussion Mrs. Gundersen spotted more of the observable traits noted on the continuum that Catie frequently engaged in. Together we decided that Catie was currently at the Self Concepting Stage of Reading Development. From there I used the copy of the continuum to show the subsequent stage of Catie's reading development. We looked at the behaviors characteristic of that stage and shared ideas on how we could nurture Catie's development. In response to the Self Concepting Reader's growing attention to print Mrs. Gundersen suggested books with a lot of rhyming words or repetitive phrases. I thought Catie would enjoy using inventive spelling to make original books of her "once upon a time" stories.

The examples that parents contributed helped me form a better understanding of each child's school and nonschool print experiences. The conference also aided our parent-teacher team in brainstorming more

individualized, meaningful ideas for each developing reader. At the end of each conference parent comments reflected their appreciation for the chance to share their observations and for the reader-friendly continuum. One parent even welcomed the continuum as an evaluation supplement: "I was so used to report cards showing me what my child can and can't do. This (referring to the continuum) is written with a focus on what my child is doing and what to expect next. It seems much more positive than the report card." The positive response and increased interaction with parents and the reading development continuum fostered our progress toward home response journaling and increased collaboration.

Journaling Journey

In theory the incorporation of journaling into the daily routine was a natural occurrence in the "whole language classroom". I admired the teachers who "just watched" as they filled reams of paper with anecdotal observations of their students engaged in learning. My previous attempts at journaling always seemed to reflect the discreet skills characteristic of the report card- the same skills that, since working with the Reading Development Continuum, weren't as meaningful to me (or parents). Journaling with parents and students about each child's language experiences and literacy behaviors would be new to all of us. I decided to focus my observation and journaling around our daily literacy centers.

For forty minutes every morning my kindergarten students worked at one of ten literacy centers. Each child "signed out" on his/her own center list for the center they would work at on any given day. As they worked with magnet letters, read the room, write the room, bookmaking, flannel boards, reading corner, big books, listening center and the poem box, I circulated among them with my clipboard in hand. Although many of the children and I shared interactions during this time, I conferenced formally with five students each day.

Conferencing allowed the children and I opportunities to visit about the project they were currently working on, any specific questions that arose and what their plans, if any, they had for their project. The "formal" conferences helped me center on each student's individual interests and provide "mini lessons" appropriate to each child's current stage of reading development. Interacting with students during literacy centers also focused me on my own possible journal entries. Each center time ended with the class re-grouping at the story corner to share what their language discoveries had been that day.

During "Group Share" each student took a turn telling about the center where he or she worked that day, and shared the "discoveries" that were made. Their discoveries ranged from "I found the letter 'r' in a poem box poem today" to "I discovered that you can use your own books to make up puppet shows," and often reflected each student's current stage of reading development. Not only did Group Share provide an opportunity for each child to report his or her experiences, but, through the classmate questions and discussion that followed, ideas for other students to explore. After everyone had a turn we each found a comfortable spot in the classroom to complete our daily journal entry.

Throughout the course of the semester, student journal entries developed from "strings of letters" or statements such as "I was at Magnet Letters" to reflective anecdotes and notes to themselves: "I was at Listening Center and me and Devon did Silly Sally and she was sleeping backwards upside down. How could she go to town upside down?". My own journal entries had also developed from the previous "skills oriented" attempts. Entries in my journal often reflected the discussions the children and I shared during conferences, student discoveries, what worked and what didn't, and, most importantly, what language experiences I might offer to nurture each child's language development. After a two-week introduction

to literacy centers and journaling, parents were invited to journal with us.

For parents the weekly class newsletter overviewed the literacy centers, group share and journaling that our class had been working on. I encouraged parents to join the children and me on our "journaling journey" by contributing their own observations of their child engaged in a variety of language experiences. In the newsletter I also provided parents with a variety of examples from commenting, questioning and/or celebrating what they observed. I connected Literacy Centers and the journaling activities to our previous discussion of Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum and emphasized that home response (Parent) journal entries were not mandatory.

After the first week 11 out of 19 families had contributed some language experiences they had observed. Many of the entries reflected experiences that had previously been highlighted in the weekly newsletter or conference discussions about the Reading Development Continuum. At our parent-teacher conferences a few weeks before, Bryant's parent questioned Bryant's inability to print all the letters of the alphabet correctly. A few weeks (and newsletters) later her journal entry reflected a more "holistic" observation: "Bryant reads that book everyday about the Little Duckling (Five Little Ducks). He has it all memorized and is quite proud of himself." Other parents asked for feedback on their entries: "Sean is starting to sound out words. I think he is going to have a big interest in reading like his sister did. Do you sound out words a lot in class?" Such inquiries provided an opportunity for me to share my observations, strategies and philosophies with parents through my journal response:

At school Sean enjoys a variety of language opportunities. He has made original puppets for a show, worked at reading beginning readers and 'played school' by reading big books with a partner. I continue to encourage him to use a variety of strategies to figure out an unknown word as he reads. Some examples (you can also offer him while he's reading at home) include:

- * saying blank for an unknown word (or skipping it)
- * deciding what word d would make sense
- * using a picture clue
- * deciding if he knows a word that rhymes with the unknown word and/or
- * sounding it out

The more strategies he is comfortable using, the better reader he will be. I am really proud of how dedicated he is to learning!

I was pleased with the parents' willingness to write , the variety of experiences they shared and observed and the more complete understanding I was gaining of my students' school and nonschool literacy life. The students, parents and I continued to exchange journals throughout the next four weeks. During the last month of school, interested parents signed up for a parent-teacher literacy conference.

Collaborative Assessment

In preparation for each child's literacy conference I reviewed his/her literacy center folder: sign-out sheet, language products and works in progress, and overviewed student, parent and my own journal entries. Based on each of the following categories: Language Center Choices, Notes from Student Journal, Notes from Teacher Journal and Notes from the Home Response Journal, I completed a brief paragraph summarizing my observations of each student's literacy interactions. Following this section was a line where the name of each child's current stage of reading development would be filled in after the parent-teacher literacy conference.

As parents and I sat down to visit about their child's literacy development the copy of Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum (that we worked through at conferences the previous fall) was close at hand. We began by reviewing the summary notes from each category of the conference write-up. As I had hoped, the conversation was not limited to the observations I excerpted from the various centers and journals. Instead, the experiences outlined in the notes reminded parents of similar language interactions with their child. As we worked our way through the summary paragraphs both the parents and I were noting similarities, clarifying

differences and gaining a better understanding of their child's current stage of reading development. Upon completion of the conference notes, we referenced the Reading Development Continuum.

Using the first semester stage of reading development as a starting point, I began reading aloud various behaviors noted on the continuum. Together, the parents, students and I decided if the student was 'fully developed', 'developing' or 'yet to develop' the given reading behaviors. When we encountered an evident grouping of developing behaviors we concentrated on that stage of development. It was wonderful to note the parents' increased understanding and comfort with Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum and their natural "look ahead" at the behaviors of the subsequent stage of development. Hearing parents confirm my observations of the student's literacy behaviors also made me feel more assured of my anecdotal notes and own journaling efforts. We finished our conference by briefly reviewing a prepared sheet for their child's stage of reading development. The sheet included a one-sentence summary of the (1e: Self-Concepting Reader), and overall and specific strategies to employ with readers at that stage. Parent response included the realization that "Hey, we already track the print with our finger as we read to Kayla," or "I never thought of keeping a scrapbook of food labels and names Matt knows how to read. That will keep him busy while I'm fixing dinner." Parents left the meeting with conference notes, the completed Reading Development Continuum, a sheet of individual strategies for their child's stage of development and the realization that their observations and opinions were factors in the reading assessment of their child.

Implications of Parent-Teacher Collaboration

Including parents as informed contributors in the reading assessment of their kindergartner proved a valuable learning experience for my students, their parents, and myself. However meaningful parent communication

efforts can be, educators may wish to consider potential problems before implementing a similar home response journal project with their class.

Inviting parents to write about their child's language experiences at home may be considered an invasion of privacy to some families, while others may feel that journal writing is an unnecessary addition to their already busy schedules. Suggesting that families contribute written journals assumes all parents are proficient and/or comfortable with their own written communication. Classroom teachers may account for some of these parent apprehensions by making a written journal response one of many home response options. Providing families with opportunities to share information in short phone calls or visits at school may appeal to the communication style and schedules of some parents.

After completing my own journal and responding to approximately 13 parent journals each week, I realize that teachers may also feel overwhelmed by the increased communication efforts. As I make plans for using home response journals with next year's kindergartners I hope to maintain the effectiveness of home-school dialogues and condense the paperwork by having one-fourth of the class return their journals each week. Providing parents a month to respond may encourage those families with busy schedules more time to make observations, while allowing the teacher to reply to a more realistic number of journals.

In addition to these logistical considerations, teachers need to reflect on how home response journals can impact students and their parents, themselves and other curricular areas. As an early child educator I felt that organizing my initial journal writing attempt around literacy centers appealed to my curriculum and was a scheduled part of the school day. Journaling, through observation and conferencing no longer left me scrambling for something to write but provided many examples supported in Cochrane's Reading Development Continuum. From my own journal reflections and my

dialogue with students and parents, I felt I better understood my students as developing readers and the literacy environment that compromised their nonschool lives. The thirteen parents that participated in the home response journal/literacy conference effort throughout commented similarly on the school language experiences of their child. Involvement with conferences, discussion of the Reading Development Continuum, and weekly newsletters and journals made parents more informed contributors in the assessment of their child's reading development. As they contributed observations and journaled about their kindergartner's language experiences, they modeled an authentic reason to write for their child. As parents and teachers interact about language experiences with the student, the student's school and nonschool lives are connected and, potentially, made more meaningful.

As educators, we can move beyond educating and informing parents about literacy and respect them as a source of insightful information pertaining to the nonschool literacy life of their child. Understanding the "whole child" means understanding how they interact with language in and outside of the school day. The enthusiasm and success of my personal home response journal journey helped me realize the potential for empowering parents as informed partners in the collaborative assessment of their child's reading development.

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The Reading Teacher

The Reading Teacher (RT) is a peer-reviewed, refereed journal published eight times each year by the International Reading Association. *RT* is an open forum for the thoughtful consideration of practices, issues, and trends within the field of reading and literacy education. Submissions focusing on children's literature or the relationships between literacy and other subject areas are also welcomed. *The Reading Teacher* serves classroom teachers, reading teachers, administrators, supervisors, consultants, college/university faculty, parents, and others who are committed to improving literacy instruction for children through age 12. It is received by approximately 65,000 individuals and institutions each month.

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The editors will consider a variety of materials for publication in *RT*. Articles, essays, and reports of different types are appropriate submissions.

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- profile or report interviews of literacy professionals or authors or illustrators of children's books. Timely and interesting interview questions should foster lively responses from the person being interviewed. Interviews should generally not exceed 10 pages and must be accompanied by a letter from the person interviewed granting permission for *RT* to publish the interview.

Articles should have a clear purpose that is addressed in some depth. Authors must demonstrate how their work relates to or extends previous work on the topic. Figures, tables, illustrations, or photographs are acceptable to the extent that they enhance readers' understanding or appreciation of the article.

Research articles should report findings in a clear, straightforward style that is less formal than that required for journals that publish only research (e.g., *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of*

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